

11/29/22 Tuesday

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Traffic Jam: Chinese Academics Find Starlink Satellites Routinely Break Space Safety Rules
By - Fantine Gardinier

Elon Musk has laid out plans to launch tens of thousands of small satellites into orbit to facilitate the Starlink global high-speed internet service, but the proposal has raised eyebrows of many space-faring countries, including the US military.

A study recently published in the Chinese peer-reviewed journal Radio Engineering has determined SpaceX routinely disregarded some of the basic rules of orbital safety with its Starlink satellites. If China doesn't follow suit, it risks being left behind in the rapidly accelerating new space race.

"We must establish a new 'space traffic rule' based on new technologies, otherwise the development of Chinese constellations will be seriously restricted," said Yu Shunjing, a satellite design engineer with DFH Satellite Co., China's largest satellite maker and one of the co-authors of the study.

Aside from some basic structures, such as a ban on [placing offensive weapons](#) in Earth orbit, there are stunningly few globally-agreed-upon rules governing spacecraft. However, some common conventions have governed space flight for decades, such as regarding 10 kilometers as the minimum distance two satellites can approach each other without substantial risk of a collision, which would produce dangerous space trash.

The distance is necessary because objects in orbit travel very fast, at least 11,300 kilometers per hour, and both computerized collision avoidance systems and human controllers on the ground require time to detect a potential collision and avoid it.

"The existing safety limit is based on scientific calculation," Yu said. "Crossing the line could lead to some dangerous consequences, because one collision can lead to another."

However, according to the Chinese study, several Starlink satellites have begun operating at just 4.9 kilometers apart in an effort to maximize data-sharing via lasers - a new method being tested by Musk's company in lieu of putting more relay stations on Earth's surface.

SpaceX already has permits to place 12,000 satellites into orbit, which observers say is already a worrisomely large number, but the company has proposed [as many as 30,000 satellites](#). Rival firms, [such as Amazon](#), have launched competing networks of thousands of satellites.

Starlink satellites have posed a danger to both other orbiting spacecraft as well as people on the ground. In July and again in October of last year, two satellites [passed perilously close](#) to China's Tiangong space station, one of which caused the space station to alter course in order to avoid a collision. Beijing blasted the US for the company's negligence, but [Musk dismissed Chinese fears](#), saying the satellite network poses no danger to other spacecraft.

There have been other close calls in space, too, such as [between lunar orbiters](#) owned by NASA and the Indian Space Research Organization in November 2021, and between several

US Geosynchronous Space Situational Awareness Program (GSSAP) “neighborhood watch” satellites and Russian geosynchronous communications satellites [between 2016 and 2018](#).

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China's Donation to Cuba Will Meet 'Most Pressing Needs' Created by US Blockade, Economist Says

By - Fantine Gardinier

Since 1962, the US has imposed an embargo against trading with Cuba, a retaliatory response to the overthrow of US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista by a rising socialist movement. The policy has caused severe economic problems for the former Spanish colony, and been denounced by nearly the entire international community.

During a visit to the People's Republic of China (PRC) last week, a Cuban delegation led by President Miguel Diaz-Canel secured key deals on loan restructuring, among numerous other economic cooperation agreements, and [a \\$100 million donation](#) to the socialist island nation. The visit was part of a global tour to secure [new trade relationships](#) with various nations, including Algeria, Turkey, Russia, and the PRC.

The friendship between the two Marxist-Leninist-led states is long, with Cuba being the first country in Latin America to recognize the PRC in September 1960. In subsequent years, Cuba drew closer to the Soviet Union, which became hostile rivals to the PRC, but after the USSR was dissolved in 1991, China and Cuba built a new friendship as two of the world's five remaining socialist states.

Luis René Fernández Tabío, PhD in Economic Sciences and full professor and researcher at the International Economic Research Center of the University of Havana, told Sputnik on Tuesday that the deals reached in Beijing, including Chinese President Xi Jinping's allocation of \$100 million to Cuba, was essential for the island to address the many economic crises created [by the US blockade](#).

“The donation from China to Cuba served urgently to buy food, I imagine, but it all resulted from the government's decision, based on the most pressing needs. It is not a secret that the island's situation is currently critical, due to a combination of factors and situations, among them, the historical structural problems of the country, in the midst of the decision for monetary and exchange rate unification,” he said.

“Add to this, the intensification of the economic, commercial and financial blockade by the United States, an economic war of more than six decades, and the effects associated with the COVID-19 pandemic such as price increases, inflation (due to internal and external causes).”

“On top of it all, they are unable to pay any of Cuba's foreign debt because the lenders have blocked financing. The visits, both to China and to the rest of the countries, were an urgent need to be able to unlock this problem and restart the matter; as well as explore and open other payment options,” he explained.

“If you look at the economic data, most of the investment and trade between Beijing and the Latin American region is with the big ones in the Southern Cone, exporters of basic products

and owners of big markets like Brazil, Argentina and Chile. In order to increase these ties, especially with the new players in the economy in the Caribbean nation, the government insists on new facilities and options for foreign investors,” Tabio explained.

“When taking stock of his visit on Sunday, President Miguel Díaz-Canel affirmed that the tour demonstrated their support for Havana, sensitivity to its problems and the willingness to support it, and classified this journey as ‘necessary and opportune.’ since it allowed the discussion of issues relevant to mutual ties,” he said.

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Minority Report: UK Census Reveals Less Than Half in England, Wales Consider Themselves Christians

By - Fantine Gardinier

Data newly released from the United Kingdom’s 2021 census has revealed that for the first time in centuries, a minority of the population of England and Wales describe themselves as Christian.

According to the Office for National Statistics, just 46.2% of respondents said they were Christian - a decline of 13.1 percentage points over the previous decade. However, those numbers weren’t lost to other faiths - Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism saw only modest increases - but rather to a growing lack of faith entirely.

The census data showed that the number of people in England and Wales who said they had no religion has increased substantially since 2011, when 25% of respondents said so. This time around, a whopping 37%, or more than 1/3, said they had no religion.

Andrew Copson, chief executive of the charity Humanists UK, mused [in a news release](#) that the results show the UK had become “almost certainly one of the least religious countries on Earth.” “One of the most striking things about these results is how at odds the population is from the state itself,” he added. “No state in Europe has such a religious set-up as we do in terms of law and public policy, while at the same time having such a non-religious population.”

However, the society, which promotes secularism, still said the religion-based question was “biased” and used a wording “which has long been shown to inflate the number of people who do not believe in, practice, or consider themselves to belong to a religion choosing a religious box.”

While the requirement of Christian oaths to hold office has been abolished, much of the Church of England remains deeply connected to the British state, with 26 seats in the House of Lords going to bishops, the Church’s Synod being able to propose legislation, and the prime minister holding the power to appoint new bishops. Religious education remains compulsory in British schools, although parents may petition the school to opt their child out, and British media are required to carry a certain amount of religious content.

Scotland and Northern Ireland, two devolved territories of the UK, reported their data separately, including [another remarkable religious reversal](#) as Catholics now outnumber Protestants in

Northern Ireland. The area was deliberately settled by England with Protestant settlers centuries ago in a bid to maintain control over all of Ireland.

Christianity has held sway in England for more than 1,400 years, when the growing power of the Catholic Church began to suppress rival pagan faiths. However, it was later supplanted by the Church of England, a Protestant sect that emerged in the 16th century CE and suppressed Catholicism. Only in the 19th century did Catholics and Jews regain their political rights, and only in the 20th century did large numbers of Muslims and Hindus begin to migrate to Britain from [the empire's colonies](#).

The Tuesday-released census data also reflected part of that continued shift, with 82% of people in England in Wales identifying as white, a decrease from 86% in 2011. Roughly 9% of respondents said they were Asian, and 4% said they were Black.

The UK's present prime minister, [Rishi Sunak](#), is the country's first head of government to be of Asian origin.

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Videos: Millions at Risk as Severe Weather Prompts Tornadoes, Hail Across US South

Meteorologists earlier warned that a weather system moving into the Pacific Northwest over the weekend was expected to bring severe weather, such as lightning, powerful winds and tornadoes, across the US South. An estimated 40 million residents have been put on notice across the entire affected region.

A significant weather outbreak is underway across parts of the Mississippi Valley, with the most severe storms already unfolding across much of the US South. The weather event is expected to endure overnight Tuesday.

The National Weather Service has indicated the most extreme risks are forecasted for parts of Mississippi and Alabama, as more isolated weather events are anticipated for Louisiana, Tennessee, Georgia, Ohio, and Indiana. Some 5 million are at greatest risk.

"This is a particularly dangerous situation," an alert issued by the agency read, noting that primary threats included numerous tornadoes, large hail and "likely" wind gusts of up to 70 miles per hour.

"Supercells are expected to develop this afternoon and track northeastward across much of northeast Louisiana and central Mississippi," the advisory states. "Parameters appear favorable for strong and long-tracked tornadoes this afternoon and early evening."

Supercells are defined as weather systems that produce severe thunderstorms capable of creating hail and/or tornadoes.

Video footage of the weather event has begun to surface on social media.

Aside from structural damages, officials are warning of potential power outages due to strong wind gusts. At present, two twisters have been confirmed in Mississippi.

The storm is expected to turn from the mid-Mississippi Valley toward the US northeast by Sunday. However, as the system moves into the North across the Great Lakes region, officials have also forecasted a fresh drop of snow for the area.

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US Gun-Related Deaths Have Hit Highest Levels in Nearly 30 Years, New Data Reveals

By - Ian DeMartino

Gun Sales in the United States increased significantly during the pandemic, with 2020 and 2021 having the highest and second-highest gun buy rates in the nation's history respectively. More than 21.5 Million guns were sold in the US in 2020 and more than 18.8 Million were sold in 2021.

Firearm-related deaths are the highest they have been in the United States in nearly 30 years, newly released data has revealed.

A study released Tuesday by JAMA Network Open has detailed that there were 1,110,421 deaths caused by firearms between 1990 and 2021, a figure that accounts for intentional and accidental deaths as well as suicides and homicides.

According to the study, gun deaths in the United States reached a low of 10 per 100,000 people in 2004, but by 2021 that number had risen more than 45% to 14.7 deaths per 100,000 people. The study showed a 40% increase in homicides and a 17% increase in suicides compared to 2004 levels.

The biggest jump came during the pandemic. In 2020 and 2021 there was a 25% increase in firearm deaths compared to figures recorded before the pandemic.

Eric Fleegler, one of the study's authors and an emergency physician at Boston Children's Hospital blames the deaths on economic strife during the pandemic and a lack of mental health resources.

However, as [The Hill points out](#), the stats also correspond with an increase in gun ownership in the United States. A previous study found that 5 million Americans became gun owners for the first time between January 2020 and April 2021.

It also appears to correlate with a rise in violence by police officers. According to a [special report](#) released in 2007 by the Justice Department, between 365 and 369 deaths happened to suspects during or after an arrest due to police officer actions in 2004. By contrast, 1,035 people were fatally shot by police officers in 2021, according to the [Washington Post](#) which started tracking police shootings in 2015.

The JAMA study also highlighted the disparities in gun-related deaths by race and gender. It states that non-Hispanic white men between the ages of 80 and 84 were most likely to die from suicide, with 46 per 100,000 people in that group dying through firearm suicide in 2021.

Meanwhile, non-Hispanic Black men aged 20 to 24 are most likely to die as a result of homicide by firearm, with 141.8 per 100,000 in that group dying in that manner. That is 22.5 times more likely than non-Hispanic white males of the same age who were killed by a firearm homicide at a rate of 6.3 per 100,000.

Young Hispanic males fell between the two groups, coming in at 22.8 deaths per 100,000 people.

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McCarthy to House Republicans: Stop 'Playing Games' With My Speaker Nomination

By - Ian DeMartino

Congress is set to elect a new speaker of the House after Republicans wrestled control of the chamber from Democrats in this year's midterm elections, albeit by a smaller-than-expected margin. Republicans hold 222 seats to the Democrats' 213.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy warned his fellow Republicans that if they "play games" with his nomination, it could open the door for Democrats to select the speaker of the House for the next Congress.

"If we don't do this right, the Democrats can take the majority. If we play games on the floor, the Democrats can end up picking who the speaker is," McCarthy said [on Newsmax](#) Monday.

The House will vote for the next speaker when the next Congress begins on January 3.

McCarthy won the GOP nomination for House Speaker earlier this month, beating Andy Biggs of Arizona in a 188-31 vote, with five members not voting for either candidate.

While all Democrats are expected to vote for their nomination, Rep. Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) has crossed the aisle and joined five Republicans in not throwing their support behind McCarthy.

The GOP members who have [publicly indicated](#) that they will not vote for McCarthy include Reps. Bob Good (VA), Ralph Norman (SC), Matt Rosendale (MT), Matt Gaetz (FL) and Biggs.

Assuming those five abstain from voting, rather than switching sides and voting for Jeffries, that would lower the GOP's advantage to 217-213, which would leave the GOP with very little margin for error.

Other GOP members have expressed some concern about McCarthy's nomination, though they did not indicate which way they plan to vote. Biggs said on a recent podcast that he believes there are 20 "hard noes" on McCarthy being the house leader, more than enough to give the edge to Democrats if Republicans cannot unify.

While a majority vote is required to secure the speaker position, it does not have to be a majority of Congress, which would require 218 votes. Any representative who is absent or votes present, along with any vacated seats, will not be included in the total. That could lower the bar Democrats have to get over to get an upset win in the election if enough Republicans refuse to back McCarthy.

McCarthy has been criticized for not committing to a budget that cuts spending, an unwillingness to impeach Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, and resisting changes to the Freedom Caucus rules that would give rank-and-file members more power.

Biggs, along with the other four members who have indicated that they won't vote for McCarthy, are part of the influential House Freedom Caucus, which formed in 2015 and was a major reason why former Rep. John Boehner (R-OH) stepped down as then-House speaker. The Freedom Caucus also withheld its support from McCarthy to replace Boehner and supported former Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI), who eventually secured the spot.

This time, the Freedom Caucus may not be so unified in stopping McCarthy. At least one member, Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), has signaled her support of McCarthy, echoing his comments that if a few moderates join with Democrats, they could pick their own candidate. McCarthy and his allies argue there is no other viable candidate for the position, whereas Biggs does not see it that way; he expects a serious contender will be apparent before the January 3 vote.

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Oath Keepers Founder Steward Rhodes Found Guilty of Seditious Conspiracy Over Capitol Riot
By - Ian DeMartino

Prosecutors said that Rhodes ran a months-long plot, intending to bring violence to the Capitol and prevent the inauguration of US President Joe Biden.

A federal jury convicted Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes on Tuesday on seditious conspiracy charges in connection to the deadly 2021 riot that saw thousands overtake the US Capitol.

Rhodes was found guilty of seditious conspiracy, obstruction of an official proceeding and aiding and abetting, and tampering with documents or proceedings and aiding and abetting.

Kelly Meggs, one of Rhodes' associates described as the "Florida state lead" by prosecutors was also found guilty of seditious conspiracy and other felonies.

Co-Defendants Jessica Watkins, Kenneth Harrelson, and Thomas Caldwell were found not guilty of seditious conspiracy but were found guilty of other felonies.

All defendants were found guilty by the jury of obstruction. Meggs, Harrelson, and Watkins were additionally found guilty of conspiracy to prevent an officer from discharging any duties. Watkins, Meggs, and Caldwell also received guilty verdicts for conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding and separate tampering counts.

The jury deliberated for three days before returning its verdict.

Both the seditious conspiracy charge and the obstruction charges carry a 20-year maximum sentence, though the Justice Department has argued in other cases for a seven to nine-year sentence for each charge based on federal advisory guidelines.

The tampering charges come with a maximum sentence of three years.

The seditious conspiracy charge was more difficult for prosecutors to prove because they had to show the jury that the defendants intended to forcibly oppose the government, while the obstruction charge was easier to prove.

Rhodes' lawyers argued that the Oath Keepers were only in DC to protect Trump supporters and anticipated that the former President would invoke the Insurrection Act to form a militia.

The case is also seen as a preview for a similar case against Proud Boys leader Henry "Enrique" Tarrío, who, along with other Proud Boys members, has also been charged with seditious conspiracy.

On January 6, 2021, thousands of Trump supporters stormed the Capitol building in an attempt to prevent the transfer of power following a "Stop the Steal" rally organized by allies of Donald Trump and headlined by the then-President.

Hundreds of people have been charged with crimes stemming from that day and a number of members of the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers have already pleaded guilty to seditious conspiracy charges. Rhodes, as the leader of the Oath Keepers, is the most high-profile conviction yet.

Both the Justice Department and a special House Select Committee are investigating what role Trump and his allies played in that riot and other efforts to overturn the election.

During the trial, Rhodes and other Oath Keeper members admitted to being in contact with several key Trump allies, including former national security aide Michael Flynn, Trump political confidant Roger Stone, and "Stop the Steal" organizer Ali Alexander.

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Way of the Future: Researchers Use AI, Chest X-Rays to Predict Heart Attacks And Strokes
By - Ian DeMartino

About 697,000 people die of heart disease in the United States alone every year, accounting for about one in every five deaths.

Researchers have developed a method that can predict a patient's risk of a heart attack or stroke using just one chest X-ray scan.

[Researchers](#) at the Radiological Society of North America were able to use artificial intelligence (AI) to accurately predict future cardiovascular events with the same accuracy as clinical methods that are far more complex and difficult to obtain.

Officials are hopeful doctors will be able to use the technology to help identify at-risk patients before their situation becomes critical.

Doctors at present use a system called the atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease risk score (ASCVD), which looks at a variety of risk factors including age, sex, race, smoking history, blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes, and blood tests to determine a patient's risk.

But not all these variables are readily available and some can be difficult to obtain.

The new method looks at patterns in chest X-rays that researchers always knew were there but didn't have a reliable method to interpret.

"We've long recognized that X-rays capture information beyond traditional diagnostic findings, but we haven't used this data because we haven't had robust, reliable methods," the study's lead author Dr. Jakob Weiss said. "Advances in AI are making it possible now."

The model has been named the CXR-CVD risk model, short for the Chest X-Ray Cardiovascular Disease risk model.

The experiment used 147,497 chest X-rays from 40,646 study participants. Researchers say they found a "significant association" between the risk predicted by the CXR-CVD model and observed major cardiac events.

They also compared the CXR-CVD accuracy to the traditional ASCVD method using the 2,401 patients with enough data to evaluate their ASCVD risk. They found that CXR-CVD matched the efficiency of traditional methods.

"What we've shown is a chest X-ray is more than a chest X-ray," Dr. Weiss said. "With an approach like this, we get a quantitative measure, which allows us to provide both diagnostic and prognostic information that helps the clinician and the patient."

The Musk Wars - Cartoon

By - Ted Rall

After accusing Apple of cutting advertising spending on Twitter, Musk fired off a tweet storm, claiming the company threatened to remove Twitter from the Apple App store. The entrepreneur also noted that he is willing to "go to war" with the massive company.

Apple has not commented on whether Twitter is at risk of being removed from the app store or if it had cut advertising on Twitter. In early November, an ad agency representing Apple, Omnicom Media Group, advised clients to "pause activity on Twitter in the short-term." Omnicom cited concerns about impersonation due to Musk's revamp of the Twitter verification check marks and layoffs in Twitter's trust and safety departments.

During his Twitter tirade, Musk also called out Apple's 30% cut of in-app purchases from applications downloaded on the its app store. It's worth noting Google also takes a 30% cut from apps in its Google Play store; however, both companies have been criticized by developers in the past and the practice was probed by the US Justice Department in 2020.

Also in 2020, Epic Games filed a lawsuit after Apple removed the popular online game Fortnite from its store in response to Epic enabling in-app payments that circumvented Apple's system and allowed users to pay Epic directly.

That case ended in a split ruling, forcing Epic to pay Apple \$6 million and ruling the game company failed to prove Apple was a monopoly, but it also ordered Apple to allow alternative payment methods. Apple has appealed the ruling and requested an injunction to delay the December 9 deadline to implement the required features.

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US Senate Banking Panel Chief Urges Yellen to Help Develop Crypto Regulation Bill - Letter

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - US Senate Banking Committee Chairman Sherrod Brown wrote a letter to Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen on Wednesday, urging the finance official to help develop legislation to further regulate crypto assets after the collapse of cryptocurrency giant FTX.

"In the wake of FTX's implosion, I ask that you coordinate with the other financial regulators to further work on the recommendations from the FSOC [Financial Stability Oversight Council] Report, including the development of legislation that would create authorities for regulators to

have visibility into, and otherwise supervise, the activities of the affiliates and subsidiaries of crypto asset entities," the letter said.

It is crucial that risks in the cryptocurrency market do not spillover into traditional financial markets and institutions, the letter said. FTX's collapse highlights the "troubling risks" of the crypto asset market, according to the letter.

FTX failed to exercise basic corporate controls or risk management over its operations, the letter said. The cryptocurrency firm's model combined three of the most common hazards in financial markets: leverage, illiquid holdings and extreme concentration, the letter said.

Brown's letter was also sent to the chairs of the Securities and Exchange Commission, Commodity Futures Trading Commission and Board of Governor of the Federal Reserve System.

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US Remains Committed to Reopening Consulate in Jerusalem – Special Envoy

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) – The United States remains committed to reopening its Consulate General in Jerusalem to maintain contacts with Palestine, US Special Representative for Palestinian Affairs Hady Amr said on Wednesday.

"We remain committed to reopening a consulate in Jerusalem. We continue to believe it could be an important way for the country to engage more deeply with the Palestinian people," Amr told reporters.

US diplomats are very focused on engagement and outreach with the Palestinian people and leadership, he added.

"We are going to continue to discuss the timeline for reopening our Consulate General with our Palestinian and Israeli partners," Amr said.

The Biden administration notified Congress last week that it had appointed Amr as the new special representative.

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DeSantis to Present Memoir in Possible Hint at 2024 Presidential Bid - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - Florida mayor Ron DeSantis will present a memoir in February 2023 chronicling his life in public service, Fox News reported on Wednesday, adding to the speculation about the potential 2024 presidential bid of the rising star of the Republican party.

The book titled "The Courage to Be Free: Florida's Blueprint for America's Revival" is due to be released on February 28 by Broadside, the conservative arm of HarperCollins Publishing.

The memoir will cover key moments in DeSantis' life, including about "growing up in a working-class family, playing in the Little League World Series, working his way through Yale University and Harvard Law School, volunteering for the Navy after 9/11 and serving in Iraq," the publishers were quoted as saying in the report.

DeSantis was reelected as governor of Florida by a wide margin on November 8, further fueling speculation that he might challenge former President Donald Trump's 2024 nomination.

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Guterres 'Deeply Saddened' by Death of Ex-Chinese President Jiang Zemin

UNITED NATIONS, November 30 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday he is "deeply saddened" by the death of former Chinese President Jiang Zemin and offered condolences on behalf of the United Nations.

Jiang died at the age of 96 due to leukemia and multiple organ failure, state media reported.

"I was deeply saddened to learn of the passing of the former President of the People's Republic of China, Jiang Zemin ... On behalf of the United Nations, I offer our sincere condolences to Jiang Zemin's family and to the Government and people of the People's Republic of China," Guterres said in a statement.

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Blinken Expresses Confidence About Sweden, Finland Joining NATO Soon

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday that he is "very confident" of seeing Sweden and Finland as new NATO members soon.

"I am very confident that Sweden and Finland will soon be formally new members of the alliance," Blinken said at a press availability in Bucharest, Romania.

He highlighted that 28 of the 30 alliance members had ratified the protocols related to the accession of Sweden and Finland "with remarkable speed."

Turkey, Sweden and Finland are engaging, along with NATO, to make sure that all of Ankara's concerns are "fully addressed," he noted.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Tuesday that he had discussed with his Finnish and Sweden counterparts, Pekka Haavisto and Tobias Billstroem, in Bucharest steps toward their admission into NATO.

On June 28, the three countries signed a trilateral memorandum, which addressed Turkey's concerns over NATO's membership of Sweden and Finland.

Sweden and Finland applied for NATO membership in May. As of now, only Turkey and Hungary have not ratified the accession of the two nations.

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Blinken Says US, Allies Have Provided \$40Bln in Arms to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The United States and its allies have provided \$40 billion in weapons to Ukraine amid Russia's special operation and will bolster their supply, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"NATO allies and partners have provided \$40 billion in arms to Ukraine, more is on the way," Blinken said at a press availability in Bucharest, noting that the allies will "maintain and bolster" their support for Ukraine.

The United States alone has provided more than \$19 billion in security assistance and nearly \$15 billion in direct economic and humanitarian support, he added.

Blinken stated that the best way to hasten prospects for diplomacy is to sustain the support to Ukraine and tilt the battlefield in its favor.

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Biden Admin Asks Congress for \$1.1Bln to Secure Energy Sector of Ukraine, Moldova -Blinken

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has requested \$1.1 billion from the US Congress to secure the energy sector of Ukraine and Moldova amid Russia's special military operation, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"We have also submitted the request to Congress for \$1.1 billion to secure Ukraine's and Moldova's energy sector and restore their energy supply," Blinken said at a press availability in Bucharest, Romania.

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RPT: PREVIEW - Biden to Host Macron for Talks on Ukraine, China, Trade Row

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will host French President Emmanuel Macron this week as the two meet to discuss a slew of issues ranging from strategy around Ukraine and China to easing economic and trade tensions.

Macron's five-day trip, which marks the first state visit of the Biden-Harris administration, comes a little more than a year after France's relationship with the US took a nosedive following Washington's sale of nuclear submarines to Australia.

Macron begins his visit on Wednesday in a meeting with US Vice President Kamala Harris at NASA's headquarters in Washington to discuss bilateral cooperation in space. The French president will also attend a working lunch at NASA on climate and biodiversity issues with members of Congress.

Harris and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will host a state luncheon for the Macrons on Thursday, according to the White House, which spokesman John Kirby said is "an opportunity to highlight a foundational component of this administration's approach to foreign policy - and that's through alliances."

The bulk of the state visit will take place on Thursday, starting with an official arrival ceremony, before the leaders sit down for bilateral talks. The visit culminates in a state dinner at the White House that evening.

In addition to holding bilateral talks with Biden, Macron's US tour includes a historic visit to New Orleans later in the week.

CHINA, UKRAINE TOP AGENDA

When Biden and Macron meet at the White House on Thursday, US officials say they are expected to have a bilateral discussion with a long agenda including Ukraine, Iran's nuclear program and China's increasing presence in the Indo-Pacific region.

"I think China will be on the very top of the agenda between the two leaders," one US official said on Monday. "Europe has its own interests - our views on China are not identical but I think there is a strong view that we should be speaking from a common script in response to China." But, US officials stressed that the Russian war in Ukraine will be "front and center" during the Oval Office meeting, with both presidents working to maintain military and economic support for Kiev.

With respect to Ukraine, Biden and Macron will discuss the country's energy infrastructure needs as winter approaches, the US official said.

Another topic of discussion will be the conference France will host in early December to develop Ukraine's resilience in the future, the US official added.

"I expect our presidents to continue discussing ways that they can support Ukraine, not only in terms of its energy security needs, but also with security assistance needs, humanitarian assistance, budgetary support," the US official said.

The two leaders will have a substantive conversation on economic and energy security elements including increased US supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Europe ahead of the coming winter, green energy, unfair trade practices by China, and the EU's concern that the Inflation Reduction Act is diverting investment away from Europe, the US official said.

EU countries fear it could possibly spark a trade war between the United States and its European partners, according to media reports.

The two presidents will also host a joint news conference followed by visits to the State Department and Capitol Hill.

HISTORIC VISIT TO NEW ORLEANS

On Friday, December 2, Macron will travel to New Orleans, where he is expected to highlight the historic connection between his country and the region.

It will be the first time a French President visits the city since 1976.

According to French newspaper Le Figaro, Macron is expected to announce a fund to finance French language education as well as speak about climate issues with Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards.

Macron is also supposed to tour the French Quarter, where he will discuss culture and music, the news outlet said.

New Orleans was founded in 1718 by Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, a French explorer and colonial administrator. The town served as the French territorial capital before becoming part of the US in the Louisiana Purchase in 1803.

France left a lasting impression on the city, with remnants of its architecture along with traditions such as the famous festival called Mardi Gras ("Fat Tuesday" in French).

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RPT - US Senate Committee to Consider Biden's Pick for Russia Ambassador on Wednesday

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) – The US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations will hold a nomination hearing on Wednesday for President Joe Biden's pick for a new ambassador to Russia.

On September 20, Biden nominated Lynne Tracy to replace John Sullivan, who was appointed by former President Donald Trump in 2019 and left Moscow on September 4 with plans to retire. Tracy's nomination must first advance through the Foreign Relations Committee before the full Senate can vote to confirm her to the post.

Since March 2019, Tracy has served as US Ambassador to Armenia.

Also during her career in the Foreign Service, the diplomat has previously served in a number of US foreign missions, including in Turkmenistan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Between 2014 to 2017 Tracy served as the Deputy Chief of Mission at the US Embassy in Moscow and received a Distinguished Honor Award for her contribution while in this role.

Prior to her service at the Moscow embassy, Tracy was Deputy Assistant Secretary for Central Asia in the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs between 2012 and 2014.

Tracy earned a bachelor's degree in Soviet Studies from the University of Georgia and a Juris Doctor degree from the University of Akron in Ohio.

Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov said earlier in November that Moscow hopes that a new US ambassador to Russia will be appointed soon and the embassy in Moscow will become fully operational.

In September, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said that Russia had agreed to the appointment of Tracy as the US ambassador to Moscow.

Tracy's nomination hearing is scheduled for 2:30 p.m. EST (19:30 GMT).

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US Supreme Court Refuses to Block Execution of Kevin Johnson Who Killed Officer in 2005

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court rejected a request to block the execution of death row inmate Kevin Johnson, who is convicted of killing a police officer in Missouri in 2005, a court filing revealed.

"The application for stay of execution of sentence of death presented to Justice [Brett] Kavanaugh and by him referred to the Court is denied," the court filing said on Tuesday night. Johnson is scheduled to be executed later Tuesday night, according to media reports. Johnson argued in his appeal to the Supreme Court that his death sentence was tainted by racism after a special prosecutor found that his original prosecutor discriminated against Black defendants.

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Boeing Wins Nearly \$400M In Order to Provide Japan With 2 KC-46 Air Tankers - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - Boeing has won a more than \$398 million US Air Force modification contract extension to provide Japan with two more KC-46A air tankers, the US Defense Department announced.

"The Boeing Company [of] Tukwila, Washington has been awarded a \$398,244,094 ... modification ... order for KC-46A Japan aircraft," the Defense Department said in a press release on Tuesday. "The contract modification is for the procurement of two aircraft for the Japan fleet."

Work on the contract will be performed in Everett in the US state of Washington over the next two and a half years and is expected to be completed by June 30, 2025, the release said.

"This modification involves Foreign Military Sales (FMS) to Japan and FMS funds are being obligated at the time of award," the release added.

The total overall face value of the contract, including the new modification, is \$1,305,430,206 and Air Force Life Cycle Management Center, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, is the contracting authority overseeing it, according to the release.

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US Senate Passes Bill Granting Federal Protections to Same-Sex, Interracial Marriages (Updates with more details in paras 5, 6)

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Tuesday passed legislation granting federal protections to same-sex and interracial marriages in the United States.

The Senate passed the Respect for Marriage Act in a vote of 61-36, with 60 votes needed for passage.

The bill requires the US federal government to recognize a marriage between two individuals if the marriage was valid in the state where it was performed. It also guarantees recognition of marriages between states through the full faith and credit clause of the US Constitution. However, the bill does not require US states to issue marriage licenses contrary to their laws. US President Joe Biden, following the passage of the legislation, said the Senate's approval of the Respect for Marriage Act is a bipartisan achievement, showcasing that Republicans and Democrats together support the right of LGBTQ and interracial couples to marry. Biden said he will sign the legislation if it passes the House of Representatives and is sent to his desk.

The legislation was crafted through bipartisan collaboration and amended to provide religious protections for organizations who do not wish to provide goods or services for the celebration of same-sex marriages. The bill also contains provisions to prevent it from being used to diminish or repeal protections such as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

The House passed the bill in July, placing the legislation on track to be signed by US President Joe Biden.

The Senate passed the bill in its so-called "lame duck session" between Election Day earlier in November and the new class of lawmakers taking office in January. While Democrats will retain their majority in the Senate, they are set to lose control of the House.

Lawmakers are also slated to consider government funding legislation, the National Defense Authorization Act, Ukraine aid and other legislative priorities before the end of the year.

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Pratt And Whitney Wins \$135Mln Contract to Maintain F135 Engines for F-35 Jet - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - Pratt and Whitney Military Engines has won a \$135 million modification contract to extend its sustainment services for the F135 engines the company produces to power the US armed forces' fleets of F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighters (JSF), the Defense Department said.

"Raytheon Technologies, Pratt and Whitney Military Engines [of] East Hartford, Connecticut is awarded a ... \$511,589,719 modification ... contract ... for F135 propulsion system annual sustainment," the Defense Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

The contract includes recurring sustainment support, program management, financial and administrative activities, propulsion integration, replenishment spare part buys and engineering support, the release said.

The contract also includes "material management, configuration management, product management support, software sustainment, security management, joint technical data updates, support equipment management, depot level maintenance and repair for all fielded propulsion systems at the F-35 production sites and operational locations," the release added.

These efforts are in support of the F-35 aircraft for the Air Force, Marine Corps, Navy, non-US Defense Department participants and foreign military sales customers, according to the release.

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Oath Keepers Founder Convicted for Plotting to Block Transfer of Power to Biden - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The founder of the far-right militia group Oath Keepers, Stewart Rhodes, has been found guilty by a federal jury of engaging in a seditious conspiracy against the US government when he plotted to violently undermine the transfer of power from former President Donald Trump to President Joe Biden after the 2020 presidential election, Politico reported.

Rhodes faces up to 20 years in prison for Tuesday's seditious conspiracy conviction.

Moreover, according to the report, the leader of the Oath Keepers chapter in the state of Florida, Kelly Meggs, was also found guilty of engaging in seditious conspiracy during the January 6 riot at the US Capitol in 2021.

Three other co-defendants in the trial - Jessica Watkins, Thomas Caldwell, and Kenneth Harrelson - were acquitted of seditious conspiracy charges, the report said.

However, all five defendants in the trial were found guilty on other felony charges such as obstruction of Congress, the report added. All five individuals face up to 20 years in prison for the obstruction charge.

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Garland, Dutch Counterpart Renew Commitment to Law Enforcement Partnership - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - US Attorney General Merrick Garland met with Dutch Minister of Justice and Security Dilan Yesilgoz-Zegerius in Washington and renewed the bilateral commitment to the law enforcement partnership between the United States and the Netherlands, the US Department of Justice said in a statement.

"We are grateful for the assistance and collaboration of our Dutch law enforcement partners, and we will continue to strengthen our shared efforts to disrupt and combat the most urgent threats facing both of our nations," Garland said in the statement on Tuesday.

Garland said that the US-Netherlands international partnerships are "force-multipliers" in the Justice Department's work to keep the United States safe, defend democracy and uphold the rule of law.

The two officials also discussed their countries' joint commitment to seeking justice for victims of what they call Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

The Netherlands has assisted the United States in prosecuting Russian businessmen looking to evade US sanctions through the Task Force KleptoCapture, which was established in March 2022 with the goal of enforcing sanctions imposed on Russia.

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US Senator Sanders Says to Block Bill to Avoid Rail Strike Until Vote Occurs on Sick Days

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - US Senator Bernie Sanders said that he will block consideration of a bill to avoid a rail strike in the United States until a vote occurs on guaranteed sick days for rail workers.

"At a time of record profits in the rail industry, it's unacceptable that rail workers have zero guaranteed paid sick days. It's my intention to block consideration of the rail legislation until a roll call vote occurs on guaranteeing seven paid sick days to rail workers in America," Sanders said via Twitter on Tuesday.

On Monday, President Joe Biden called on Congress to immediately adopt a tentative agreement between railroad worker unions and operators to avert a nationwide rail strike that could send ripples through the economy.

Biden said the deal would provide a 24% pay raise for rail workers, improved healthcare benefits and the ability to take unscheduled leave for medical needs. A nationwide rail strike, which may begin as early as December 9, could cost the US economy \$2 billion per day, the Association of American Railroads said. Averting the rail strike is one of several agenda items for Congress to work out in its so-called "lame duck" session before the end of the year, along with passing government funding legislation and the National Defense Authorization Act.

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Google Announces \$13.2Mln Grant to Fact-Checking Network to Support Work Worldwide

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - Google and subsidiary YouTube are putting \$13.2 million towards a grant to a fact-checking network to support their work addressing misinformation worldwide, the companies said in an official blog post. "Today, Google and YouTube are announcing a \$13.2 million grant to the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) at the nonprofit Poynter Institute to launch a new Global Fact Check Fund to support their network of 135 fact-checking organizations from 65 countries covering over 80 languages," the post said on Tuesday. The \$13.2 million endeavor is the companies' single largest grant in fact-checking, the post said. The Global Fact Check Fund will help fact-checkers to scale existing operations or launch new ones that elevate information, uplift credible sources and reduce the harm of mis- and disinformation around the world, the post said. The fund will open in early 2023, according to the post. Moreover, YouTube will host a training series starting next year for fact-checking organizations interested in learning more about the platform and best practices for engagement, the post said. Since 2018, the Google News Initiative has invested nearly \$75 million in projects and partnerships working to strengthen media literacy and combat misinformation worldwide, the post said. The new grant to IFCN builds on that commitment, the post added. Google and YouTube remain committed to continuing to support journalists and fact-checking organizations on the frontlines of the fight against misinformation, the post also said.

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US Seeks to Study Medical Care During Combat Operations in Ukraine - Notice

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The United States seeks to procure study services related to medical care during large-scale combat operations, including ones in support of improved trauma care and mental health care of Ukrainian troops amid Russia's special military operation, according to a solicitation notice.

"The US Army Medical Research Acquisition Activity intends to issue a sole source award for US Army Medical Research and Development Command's Combat Casualty Care Research Program [MRDC CCCRP] program office for a new contract with the Henry M. Jackson Foundation," the notice said on Tuesday. "Services the MRDC CCCRP program office requires is the study of the medical care provided during large-scale combat operations."

According to the notice, there is a joint interest of the Defense Department and Congress to establish bilateral partnerships between the United States and Ukraine in support of improved trauma care and combat-related mental health care.

The Defense Department is planning to award \$3 million from the fiscal year 2022 funds within the next 30 days, the notice said.

The Henry M. Jackson Foundation will be awarded the funding without competition after the US government established that the organization's existing partnerships and infrastructure are already in place in Ukraine.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Defense Department published a notice seeking research services to identify innovative ways to use lethal and non-lethal delivery capabilities in unmanned aerial systems.

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China Plans Full Modernization of All Armed Forces to Beat 'Strong Enemies' - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - China plans to complete its full modernization of both, strategic nuclear and conventional air, land and sea military forces to conduct a full range of warfare across all domains against any "strong enemy," which appears to indicate the United States, the annual US Defense Department to Congress on Beijing's military capabilities, said.

"The PLA [People's Liberation Army] seeks to modernize its capabilities and improve its proficiencies across all warfare domains so that, as a joint force, it can conduct the full range of land, air and maritime as well as nuclear, space, counterspace, electronic warfare (EW) and cyberspace operations, the report, dubbed "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," said on Tuesday.

The evolving capabilities of China's armed forces continue to strengthen its abilities to win wars against strong enemy nations including the United States, the report said.

"The PLA's evolving capabilities and concepts continue to strengthen the PRC [People's Republic of China]'s ability to fight and win wars against a strong enemy (a euphemism likely for the United States), counter an intervention by a third party in a conflict along the PRC's periphery and project power globally," the report added.

In 2021, the Chinese military carried out major exercises involving amphibious operations with its Navy and civilian roll-on, roll-off vessels, according to the report.

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NY Mayor Announces Long-term Plan to Care for Severely Mentally Ill – Release

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) – New York Mayor Eric Adams announced a long-term, 11-point plan to tackle the mental health crisis that the city has long struggled to deal with, a press release from the mayor's office said.

"Today, we are embarking on a long-term strategy to help more of those suffering from severe and untreated mental illness find their way to treatment and recovery," Adams said in a press conference. "... We can no longer deny the reality that untreated psychosis can be a cruel and all-consuming condition that often requires involuntary intervention, supervised medical treatment, and long-term care. We will change the culture from the top down and take every action to get care to those who need it."

Adams said the plan "begins with an immediate shift in how we interpret our obligation to those in need and calls upon our outreach workers to take deeper actions and more intensive engagements."

"To begin that process, our team has developed an 11-point legislative agenda to address those gaps, and getting it enacted will be a major priority for us in 2023. This agenda is already available online and to the public. But even as we move forward on that agenda, there is much we can do now by properly interpreting and carrying out existing law," Adams said.

The mayor said the directive his administration has created lays out what he calls an expedited, step-by-step process for involuntarily transporting a person experiencing a mental health crisis to a hospital for evaluation. Among the provisions: mobile crisis teams and police officers will receive enhanced training on how to help people experiencing a mental health crisis.

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PREVIEW - Biden to Host Macron for Talks on Ukraine, China, Trade Row

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will host French President Emmanuel Macron this week as the two meet to discuss a slew of issues ranging from strategy around Ukraine and China to easing economic and trade tensions.

Macron's five-day trip, which marks the first state visit of the Biden-Harris administration, comes a little more than a year after France's relationship with the US took a nosedive following Washington's sale of nuclear submarines to Australia.

Macron begins his visit on Wednesday in a meeting with US Vice President Kamala Harris at NASA's headquarters in Washington to discuss bilateral cooperation in space. The French president will also attend a working lunch at NASA on climate and biodiversity issues with members of Congress.

Harris and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will host a state luncheon for the Macrons on Thursday, according to the White House, which spokesman John Kirby said is "an opportunity to highlight a foundational component of this administration's approach to foreign policy - and that's through alliances."

The bulk of the state visit will take place on Thursday, starting with an official arrival ceremony, before the leaders sit down for bilateral talks. The visit culminates in a state dinner at the White House that evening.

In addition to holding bilateral talks with Biden, Macron's US tour includes a historic visit to New Orleans later in the week.

CHINA, UKRAINE TOP AGENDA

When Biden and Macron meet at the White House on Thursday, US officials say they are expected to have a bilateral discussion with a long agenda including Ukraine, Iran's nuclear program and China's increasing presence in the Indo-Pacific region.

"I think China will be on the very top of the agenda between the two leaders," one US official said on Monday. "Europe has its own interests - our views on China are not identical but I think there is a strong view that we should be speaking from a common script in response to China." But, US officials stressed that the Russian war in Ukraine will be "front and center" during the Oval Office meeting, with both presidents working to maintain military and economic support for Kiev.

With respect to Ukraine, Biden and Macron will discuss the country's energy infrastructure needs as winter approaches, the US official said.

Another topic of discussion will be the conference France will host in early December to develop Ukraine's resilience in the future, the US official added.

"I expect our presidents to continue discussing ways that they can support Ukraine, not only in terms of its energy security needs, but also with security assistance needs, humanitarian assistance, budgetary support," the US official said.

The two leaders will have a substantive conversation on economic and energy security elements including increased US supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Europe ahead of the coming winter, green energy, unfair trade practices by China, and the EU's concern that the Inflation Reduction Act is diverting investment away from Europe, the US official said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) -

OSCE MINISTERIAL MEETING IN POLAND

* US Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland will travel to Poland this week for the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe's (OSCE) foreign ministers' meeting, the State Department said on Tuesday.

* The United States believes that designating Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism would hamper certain actions designed to help Ukraine, US Permanent Representative to the OSCE Michael Carpenter said.

* The United Nations and OSCE are inclusive organizations without any mechanism to exclude Russia as a member, Carpenter said.

PENTAGON REPORT TO US CONGRESS

* The US Defense Department on Tuesday issued a report to Congress in which it said that China could conduct a range of campaigns against Taiwan ranging from an air or maritime blockade to a full-scale invasion.

* The Defense Department said in the report that it projects China to likely field 1,500 nuclear warheads by 2035.

WESTERN MILITARY SUPPORT TO UKRAINE

* The United States does not have any plans at this time to provide Patriot surface-to-air missile systems to Ukraine, Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Tuesday.

* The United States does not consider that Ukraine has an immediate need for fighter aircraft amid Russia's special military operation, a senior Defense Department official said.

* The United States is considering providing Patriot surface-to-air missile missiles to Ukraine, a senior Defense Department official told reporters.

* US House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said that he does not support a "blank check" for aid to any cause, including Ukraine, and wants to ensure that taxpayer funds are spent correctly.

US-RUSSIA TALKS ON NEW START TREATY

* Moscow expects that the United States will facilitate the meeting of the consultative commission on the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in 2023, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Tuesday.

* Russia is committed to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and the postponement of the meeting of the bilateral consultative commission does not violate it, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.

* There are no signals that the United States is ready to resume negotiations with Russia on strategic stability, Ryabkov said.

* Russia did not see any will of the United States to move forward in solving problems on the topic of Washington's way of counting toward the aggregate limit provided for in the New START, this was one of the factors in the postponement of the Cairo consultations, Ryabkov said.

* The United States wanted to discuss only the issue of resuming inspections at the meeting on the New STAR) in Cairo, while other issues were a priority for Moscow, Ryabkov said.

GLOBAL ENERGY MARKETS

* Russia is open to and interested in a dialogue on energy with China, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Tuesday.

* The idea of creating a "tripartite gas union" of Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan still needs to be formalized, but the energy supply routes in this region are extremely relevant, Peskov said.

* The European Union continues to discuss imposing a price cap on Russian seaborne oil despite disagreements over its amount among member states, with Greece and other oil

transporting countries seeking a higher ceiling instead of the lower cap proposed by Poland and the Baltics, an EU source told Sputnik.

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University of Ottawa Under Fire After Banning Cameras at Chinese Embassy Event

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) – The University of Ottawa faced criticism after it banned journalists from taking pictures at an event with Chinese Ambassador Cong Peiwu at the latter's request.

On Monday, the University of Ottawa held a conference called "China and the World: Development, Trade and Governance in the 21st Century," presented by the Chinese ambassador to Canada.

According to Radio-Canada, various media representatives were present at the event, but the university "suddenly" accepted the "request" of Ambassador Cong to prohibit cameras in the conference room.

Furthermore, as Cong was presiding over the conference, a protest denouncing the Chinese treatment of the Uyghurs was taking place outside of the building, the report said, adding that university personnel closed the curtains to hide its presence from the event.

A number of journalists, professors and parliament members expressed their discontent with Jacques Fremont, president and vice chancellor of the university, and his decision to "bend" to Cong's request, the report said.

Marc-Francois Bernier, a professor of journalism at the University of Ottawa, said in a tweet he is not "being proud" of the institution that employs him, adding the decision was supported from "high above" in the administration.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also weighed in on the debate, stating that the university "made a mistake" by banning cameras, noting that Canada is known for its openness and media must have access.

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US Approves Possible \$1Bn Sale of Unmanned Aircraft Systems to Qatar – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United States approved a possible \$1 billion sale of 10 unmanned aircraft systems and related equipment to Qatar, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Tuesday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Qatar of the Fixed Site-Low, Slow, Small Unmanned Aircraft System Integrated Defeat System (FS-LIDS) System of Systems and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$1 billion," DSCA said in a press release.

The related equipment includes 200 Coyote Block 2 interceptors, the Counter Unmanned Electronic Warfare System (CUAEWS), Coyote launchers, Ku Band Multi-function Radio Frequency System (KuMRFS) radars, and Forward Area Air Defense Command and Control (FAAD C2), the release added.

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McConnell Says Republicans Divided on Approach to Government Funding Crunch

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said on Tuesday that Republicans are divided on how to approach funding the government with a shutdown deadline looming next month and the party taking control of the House in January. In September, Congress passed a continuing resolution to fund the government at previously appropriated levels ahead of a possible shutdown in October. The continuing resolution funds the government through December 16, at which point the government would again risk a shutdown unless Congress passes a new omnibus funding bill or another continuing resolution. "It's a difficult choice, frankly. If you are interested in reducing spending, probably the best way to do that would be a one-year continuing resolution. If, on the other hand, you're concerned about the defense of our country and the funding of the Ukraine war, you are somewhat hesitant to go in that direction. I have members in a variety of different positions on this," McConnell said during a press conference.

McConnell said that he believes the way forward is to continue discussing the matter.

McConnell met with US President Joe Biden and other congressional leadership to discuss the agenda for the so-called "lame duck" session through the end of the year.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Tuesday that the leaders agreed an omnibus spending bill is the best option and that another continuing resolution would hurt national security. The sentiment echoes arguments made by US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in recent letters to congressional leaders.

Schumer said he and McConnell agreed that the House and Senate appropriations committees will meet soon to begin working on funding legislation.

During the lame duck session, Congress is slated to consider the government funding challenge, the National Defense Authorization Act and Ukraine aid among other issues as Democrats are set to lose their majority in the House in January.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, who is a favorite to become Speaker in the new Congress, said on Tuesday that he would support a continuing resolution to fund the government if an omnibus bill cannot be negotiated. Congress could then consider the issue in January, when Republicans will have control of the House, McCarthy said.

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Convicted Spy Whelan's Family Say Russian Authorities Transferred Him to Prison Hospital

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The family of convicted spy Paul Whelan, who is serving his sentence in a prison in Russia, said in a statement on Tuesday that he has been transferred to a prison hospital.

"The labor colony staff at IK-17 say he was moved on Friday, November 17 (the day after the US and Irish Embassy visit) to the hospital prison," the statement said.

On Tuesday, the Whelans expressed concern that Paul did not call them last week. Now, the family says the reason for Paul's transfer to the prison hospital is unknown.

"Paul was not complaining of any health conditions that required hospitalization, so has there been an emergency? He appeared healthy and well to the Embassy staff," the statement said. A Moscow court sentenced Whelan in June 2020 to a 16-year prison term for engaging in espionage in Russia.

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Royal Bank of Canada to Acquire HSBC Branch in Country for \$9.9Bln - Statement

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) said in a statement on Tuesday that it has agreed to acquire HSBC Bank Canada for C\$13.5 billion (US\$9.9 billion). "Royal Bank of Canada (TSX: RY) (NYSE: RY) today announced it has entered into an agreement to acquire HSBC Bank Canada ('HSBC Canada')," the statement said. "Under the terms of the agreement, RBC will acquire 100% of the common shares of HSBC Canada for an all-cash purchase price of \$13.5 billion."

All earnings made by HSBC Bank Canada since will be attributed to the Royal Bank of Canada, the statement said.

HSBC Canada has \$98.8 billion worth of assets as of September and 130 branches and 4.200 full-time employees.

Royal Bank of Canada President and CEO Dave McKay said the acquisition of HSBC will position it as a "bank of choice" for clients who might carry business internationally, the statement said.

The Department of Finance issued a statement saying that it was aware of the deal and noted the sale will be subject to regulatory approvals as per Canadian law.

"The Office of the Superintendent of Financial Institutions (OSFI) will administer the application process and provide a recommendation to the Minister of Finance," the statement said, adding that the Competition Bureau will also review the transaction.

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Pedersen Hopes Syrian Constitution Committee to Meet in January Despite Tension Over Venue

UNITED NATIONS, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United Nations hopes that the Syrian Constitutional Committee will reconvene in January, but it depends on whether an agreement will be reached regarding the venue amid Russia's objections to Geneva continuing to be the host, UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen said on Tuesday.

"My hope is that it should be possible to convene in January but that depends on the will of Russia when it comes to the issue of venue," Pedersen told a UN Security Council meeting. The meeting should take place in Geneva, he added.

In June, Russia suggested that a new venue should be chosen for meetings of the Syrian Constitutional Committee, expressing concerns that Switzerland had lost its impartiality and neutral status. Moscow proposed Muscat, Abu Dhabi, Algiers, and Nur-Sultan as options. Pedersen's remarks to the Security Council come amid increased tensions in Syria. Since November 20, Turkey has been conducting an air operation against militant bases of the People's Defense Units (YPG) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) — groups outlawed in Turkey — in northern Syria and Iraq. The strikes follow a deadly bombing in Istanbul.

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Middle Earth Orbit Missile Tracking Payload Passes Critical Design Review - Raytheon

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Raytheon Intelligence and Space's sensor payload for the US Space Force's Missile Track Custody program for use in tracking objects in middle Earth orbit has passed its critical design review on schedule, the company announced in a press release on Tuesday.

"Raytheon Intelligence and Space's sensor payload, for the US Space Force's Missile Track Custody (MTC) program, recently passed the tailored mission payload critical design review on schedule. The MTC program seeks to deploy initial warfighter capability for missile tracking at MEO," the release said.

The US Space Force established the MTC program to accelerate the fielding of a resilient persistent detection and missile tracking capability from MEO, the release said.

"Our country faces new and diverse missile threats that require a layered approach to detection, tracking and defense. Using the latest digital engineering techniques, we've successfully completed key design elements of the fully compliant payload design in just under 18 months," the release said.

The US military at present carry out their missile warning and tracking from highly-elliptical and geostationary orbits and they plan to expand the capability to low Earth orbit in the coming years, the release added.

MTC will provide another layer to the missile warning, missile defense and missile tracking architecture that provides the ability to detect and maintain custody of emerging missile threats,

while also providing large area coverage with fewer sensors than Low earth Orbit (LEO) solutions, according to the release.

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US Considering Designating Russia's Wagner Group as Foreign Terror Organization - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United States is considering designating Russia's Wagner Group, a private military company, as a foreign terrorist organization in an effort to hamper their operations in Africa, Bloomberg reported on Tuesday.

The Biden administration is weighing whether to make the designation, which would allow the US to prosecute the group and its members, although no final decision has been made, the report said, citing two people familiar with the matter.

The designation would also allow the US to go after the group's financial assets around the globe, the report said.

The move would come as part of an effort to handicap Wagner Group's own counterterror efforts in Africa, the report said.

In September, Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin admitted to establishing Wagner Group in 2014, which has engaged in operations in Africa, Syria and Donbas.

In July, the US State Department offered up to a \$10 million reward for info on Prigozhin and the linked Internet Research Agency for alleged attempts to interfere in US elections.

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US Scrapping GeoCarb Space Mission to Measure Greenhouse Gas in Atmosphere - NASA

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The US government has abandoned its original plan to measure the levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere through a GeoCarb - search for geological carbon - satellite, NASA announced in a press release on Tuesday.

"NASA ... intends to cancel development of its GeoCarb mission, and instead implement a plan for pursuing alternate options to measure and observe greenhouse gases," the release said. Newer options to make key greenhouse gas measurements are emerging that were not previously available for the agency when considering GeoCarb, the release said.

"NASA's newest instrument that launched in July to the International Space Station, the Earth Surface Mineral Dust Source Investigation (EMIT), can measure methane," the release added. Now NASA plans to expand its greenhouse gas observations by prioritizing a greenhouse gas mission as the first Earth System Explorers mission that will get data on greenhouse gases from international and commercial partners, extending the Orbiting Carbon Observatory-3 mission aboard the orbital laboratory and conducting extra airborne observations, according to the release.

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US to Co-Host Second 'Summit for Democracy' in 2023

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United States will host another Summit for Democracy with Costa Rica, Netherlands, South Korea, and Zambia next spring, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday.

"In the new year, we will be joined by new co-host governments Costa Rica and the Netherlands and the Republic of Korea and the Republic of Zambia, joining together with a regionally diverse group of partners to host the summit [which] underscores that democratic values are both a shared global aspiration and a shared global responsibility," Jean-Pierre said at a briefing.

The summit will also assemble world leaders in a virtual plenary format followed by in-person gatherings in each co-host country, with representatives from government, civil society, and the private sector, the White House also said.

The Summit aims to reaffirm the vitality of the democratic model and collective action to meet the unprecedented challenges of our time, she added.

According to a joint statement released earlier in the day, the summit will be held on March 29-30, 2023.

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US Defense Secretary Austin Will Attend Unveiling of New B-21 Bomber on Friday - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will attend the unveiling of the new B-21 Raider strategic bomber in California on Friday, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Tuesday.

"This Friday, Secretary Austin will participate in the unveiling of the US Air Force's newest strategic bomber, the B-21 Raider, in Palmdale, California," Ryder said during a press briefing.

The B-21 Raider, developed by Northrop Grumman, is intended to be a long-range stealth aircraft capable of delivering conventional and thermonuclear weapons.

The B-21 Raider will incrementally replace the B-1 and B-2 bombers, becoming the backbone of the US Air Force's bomber fleet, Ryder said last month.

The United States has not introduced a new bomber aircraft in more than 30 years.

The B-21 raider will provide the US with a formidable combat capability deployable across a range of operations in highly contested environments, Ryder said.

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Biden Confident There Will Be No Nationwide Rail Strike in US - White House

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is confident that there will not be a nationwide rail strike in the United States, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday.

"[Biden] He said to me that he is confident that we will not have a rail strike. That is what he's confident about," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing aboard Air Force One.

According to the Association of American Railroads (AAR), a nationwide rail strike could cost the US economy \$2 billion per day, and it may potentially begin as early as December 9 if not all rail worker unions agree to an agreement with rail operators.

Eight of the 12 labor unions plus a portion of one of the largest US rail unions, SMART-TD, have now fully agreed to contracts forged in part by the leadership of the Biden administration. These deals provide employees with a 24% wage increase over the five-year period from 2020 to 2024 and preserve employees' healthcare coverage, according to the AAR.

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Pentagon Says Has No Plans to Provide Patriot Missiles to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United States does not have any plans at this time to provide Patriot surface-to-air missile systems to Ukraine, Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Tuesday.

"Air defense continues to be a top priority for the Defense Department and for the international community when it comes to supporting Ukraine. In terms of any type of Patriot battery from the US, right now, we have no plans to provide Patriot batteries to Ukraine, but again, we'll continue to have those discussions," Ryder said during a press briefing.

Advanced systems such as the Patriot missile system require significant maintenance and training, which is accounted for when determining what aid to provide Ukraine, Ryder said.

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US Seeks to Backstop Home Loans of Above \$1M In First Time in Years - Housing Agency

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The US government is preparing to backstop mortgages, or home loans, of more than \$1 million, the Federal Housing Finance Agency announced on Tuesday in the first move of its kind in years due to an acceleration in house prices after the coronavirus pandemic.

"For areas in which 115 percent of the local median home value exceeds the baseline conforming loan limit, the applicable loan limit will be higher than the baseline loan limit," the

agency said in a statement that broke down the coverage it would provide. " In these areas, the baseline loan limit will be \$1,089,300 for one-unit properties."

Conforming loans are mortgages that fall within smaller limits set by the agency and they typically come with smaller down-payment and closing costs for buyers. Non-conforming loans, also known as jumbo mortgages, conversely incur larger down-payments and closing costs.

The statement issued on Tuesday said that for most parts of the country, loan limits backstopped by the government will rise to \$726,200 from a 2022 maximum of \$647,200. Whatever relief higher loan limits may offer home buyers is likely "more than offset" by the Federal Reserve's rate hikes since March, the Wall Street Journal said, commenting on the move.

Since 2022 began, both the White House and economic policy-makers at the Fed have struggled to contain inflation, with the annual reading for the Consumer Price Index (CPI) hitting a four-decade high of 9.1% in June. The Fed has added 375 basis points to interest rates since March via six rate hikes. Prior to that, interest rates were at a peak of just 25 basis points, as the central bank cut rates to nearly zero after the global outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020.

The Fed's rate hikes have pushed up borrowing costs, adding to higher overall expense for consumers, some of whom have begun to rein in their spending. US consumer confidence, one of the pillars of the economy, fell again in November after hitting three-month lows in October, according to The Conference Board, which groups public and private corporations that track and publish economic data.

On the mortgage side, the average rate for a 30-year, fixed loan for a US home has risen to 7.08% from a previous 6.95%. Mortgage rates have been hovering around the highest levels in two decades and 7.08% is so far the tops in this year's range.

The higher costs have weighed on the US housing market. New home sales plummeted 11% in September, reversing the large gain in the prior month, as spiraling lending rates choked off prospective buyers. Home prices, meanwhile, slumped 1.1% in September home prices reported by S&P Case-Shiller.

Housing and real estate play important roles in the US economy, with roughly 65% of occupied housing units being owner-occupied. That makes homes a substantial source of household wealth and home construction a key provider of employment.

In the 2008/09 financial crisis, a crash of the housing market precipitated what later came to be known as the era of the Great Recession. Since then, the US property market has rapidly recovered on the back of economic recovery as well as demand from buyers.

Until their recent decline, US home prices jumped almost 40% over the past two years. Price hikes and higher rates by the Fed have pushed up the cost of home ownership in the United States to the highest in a generation, putting purchases out of reach for a growing number of prospective buyers, particularly first-timers.

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McCarthy Says Rail Strike Legislation Will Pass But Unhappy How US Runs Economy

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - US House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said on Tuesday that he believes the railway strike legislation will pass in Congress, however, he emphasized that it is unfortunate the way the US economy is .

"I think it will pass, but it's unfortunate that this is how we're running our economy today," McCarthy told reporters.

Earlier on Tuesday, President Joe Biden met with congressional leaders from both parties, including Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi as well as McCarthy to discuss the so-called "lame duck" legislative session.

On Monday, Biden called on Congress to immediately adopt a tentative agreement between railroad worker unions and operators to avert a nationwide rail strike that could send ripples through the economy. Biden said the deal would provide a 24% pay raise for rail workers, improved health care benefits and the ability to take unscheduled leave for medical needs. A nationwide rail strike, which may begin as early as December 9, could cost the US economy \$2 billion per day, the Association of American Railroads said.

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McCarthy Questions Why US Would Monitor Twitter Under Musk, Calls to 'Stop Picking' on Him

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - US House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy on Tuesday questioned why the US government would want to monitor the operation of Twitter under billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk and called on officials to stop targeting him.

"Government is going to go after someone who wants to have free speech? What do they have to look at Twitter about? Do they want to go more after the American public about whether they can have an opinion on something? I think the American public has spoken on this. I think our First Amendment stands up. I think they should stop picking on Elon Musk," McCarthy said during a press conference.

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said earlier this week that the Biden administration has been monitoring what is happening with Twitter since the social media platform's purchase by Musk in October.

Under Musk, Twitter has reinstated a number of previously suspended accounts, including those of former US President Donald Trump and artist Kanye West. The company has drawn criticism for bolstering its free speech protections, with Musk claiming that Apple is threatening to remove the platform from its application store.

On Monday, Musk said that protecting free speech and reforming Twitter is a "battle for the future of civilization," warning that tyranny lies ahead if the battle is lost.

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China Could Conduct Range of Campaigns Against Taiwan, Including Invasion- Pentagon Report

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department on Tuesday issued a report to Congress in which it said that China could conduct a range of campaigns against Taiwan ranging from an air or maritime blockade to a full-scale invasion.

"The PRC [People's Republic of China] could conduct a range of options for military campaigns against Taiwan, with varying degrees of feasibility and associated risks. These options may range from an air and/or maritime blockade to a full-scale amphibious invasion to seize and occupy some of its offshore islands or all of Taiwan," the report said.

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US Has No 'Immediate Priority' to Provide Ukraine With Fighter Jets - Pentagon Official

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United States does not consider that Ukraine has an immediate need for fighter aircraft amid Russia's special military operation, a senior Defense Department official said on Tuesday.

"In terms of fighter aircraft, when we think about that as a future capability area for the Ukrainian Armed Forces to invest in, we have to think about the sustainment and maintenance and training that all goes along with having attack air fleet, and so that's where it really isn't something that is an immediate priority for us as we consider the Ukrainian Armed Forces capability needs," the official said during a conference call.

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Pentagon Official Says US Considering Supplying Patriot Surface-to-Air Missiles to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United States is considering providing Patriot surface-to-air missile missiles to Ukraine, a senior Defense Department official told reporters on Tuesday.

"All capabilities are on the table," the official said when asked whether the US government has been considering providing Patriot missiles to Ukraine.

US defense officials have said that the Patriot batteries would complement the existing capabilities provided to Ukraine and would be helpful to counter ballistic missile attacks.

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China Likely to Have 1,500 Nukes by 2035 - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon projects that China will likely field 1,500 nuclear warheads by 2035, the US Defense Department said in a report to Congress on Tuesday.

"The PLA [People's Liberation Army] plans to 'basically complete modernization' of its national defense and armed forces by 2035. If China continues the pace of its nuclear expansion, it will likely field a stockpile of about 1,500 warheads by that time," the Pentagon said in the report.

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UN, OSCE Are Inclusive Organizations Without Mechanism to Exclude Russia - US Official

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) are inclusive organizations without any mechanism to exclude Russia as a member, US Permanent Representative to the OSCE Michael Carpenter said on Tuesday.

"These are inclusive organizations without mechanism to exclude a member. There is no mechanism to exclude Russia from OSCE or UN," he said speaking about UN and OSCE.

He added that there will be an ambassador of Russia at the OSCE ministerial.

Carpenter also spoke on the denial of a visa for Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, saying the US respects Poland's choice given visa matters are a sovereign prerogative.

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McCarthy Says Doesn't Support Blank Check for Ukraine, Wants to Ensure Funds Used Properly

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - US House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said on Tuesday that he does not support a "blank check" for aid to any cause, including Ukraine, and wants to ensure that taxpayer funds are spent correctly.

"I'm not for a blank check for anything. This is hard-working taxpayer money, and I want to make sure that whatever funding we send goes to the right places," McCarthy said during a press conference, when asked where he stands on support for future Ukraine aid.

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Russia Calls on US to Behave in Accordance With International Law in Syria - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, November 29 (Sputnik) - Russia calls on the US "occupying forces" in Syria to behave in accordance with international humanitarian law, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Tuesday.

"We call on Washington not to make appeals to fulfillment of international humanitarian law but also rather take specific measures to ensure that American occupying forces in Syria fulfill these norms," Nebenzia told the UN Security Council.

The Russian ambassador said that achieving long-term and lasting peace in Syria is only possible if the country's territorial integrity is re-established.

On Sunday, Turkey conducted airstrikes in northern Syria and Iraq against bases of the People's Defense Units and the Kurdistan Workers' Party - both outlawed in Turkey as terrorist organizations. The strikes came after the recent deadly terrorist attacks in Turkey. According to the Turkish Defense Ministry, a total of 89 targets were destroyed in the strikes.

On November 24, Turkish National Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said during a phone conversation with his Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu that Ankara's priority in northern Syria was to prevent a terrorist threat against Turkey.

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Designating Russia State Sponsor of Terror Would Hamper US Support to Ukraine - State Dept

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United States believes that designating Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism would hamper certain actions designed to help Ukraine, US Permanent Representative to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Michael Carpenter said on Tuesday.

"It would hamper our ability to provide humanitarian assistance and other forms of support to Ukraine," Carpenter told reporters.

Such a designation also would not give additional tools to ramp up the cost on Russia, he added.

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Congress Must Pass Full-Year Funding Bill or Risk Hurting US Defense - Senator

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The US Congress must pass a full-year government funding bill instead of another stopgap resolution or risk harming national defense, Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Mark Warner said on Tuesday.

"We've got to make sure we get full-year funding. It would be crazy to go with a continuing resolution again. That would cost the taxpayer tons of dollars and really hurt our defense establishment," Warner told CNN.

In September, Congress passed a continuing resolution to temporarily fund the government at previously appropriated levels through December 16 in order to avoid a shutdown. The government risks another shutdown unless a full-year funding bill or continuing resolution is passed before then.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin recently sent a letter to lawmakers calling on Congress to pass a full-year funding bill instead of a temporary one, arguing that financial uncertainty diminishes the Defense Department's ability to compete with China and provide for its service members.

Congress, which is currently operating in a so-called "lame duck" session between Election Day and the new class of lawmakers taking office in January, is slated to try and pass a funding bill, secure more aid for Ukraine and avert a rail strike among other agenda items during the session.

Earlier on Tuesday, President Joe Biden met with congressional leaders to discuss the lame duck session and said he hopes lawmakers would come together to fund the government and its priorities.

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US Tests Deconfliction Line With Russia on Ukraine Daily - European Command

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The US military tests daily the deconfliction line with the Russian military for matters related to Ukraine, a European Command (EUCOM) spokesperson told Sputnik on Tuesday.

The spokesperson responded to media reports claiming that the deconfliction line between the US and Russian militaries has been used only once since the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February.

"The United States retains a number of channels to discuss critical security issues with the Russians during a contingency or emergency," the spokesperson said. "The deconfliction line is one channel available to communicate tactical level concerns with the Russian military, if needed, to prevent miscalculation, military incidents and escalation. The line is tested daily, making contact with the Russian military by phone, to ensure it is operational."

The spokesperson's comment does not confirm reports about the US and Russian militaries using the deconfliction line.

Earlier on Tuesday, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told reporters that Russia and the United States do not conduct a dialogue on Ukraine, but periodically exchange signals about what is happening in the conflict, and the exchange cannot turn into a dialogue or deconfliction channel because of the difference in approaches,

In late October, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley held calls with their Russian counterparts to address Moscow's concerns that Ukraine was preparing to use a "dirty bomb."

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US Consumer Confidence Down 2nd Straight Month, Stoking Recession Worry - Conference Board

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - US consumer confidence fell for a second month in a row in November, suggesting more Americans were worried about the prospect of recession, economic analysis and forecasting group The Conference Board said Tuesday.

The board's Consumer Confidence Index stood at 100.2 for this month, down from 102.2 in October. Its Present Situation Index — based on consumers' assessment of current business and labor market conditions — decreased to 137.4 from 138.7 last month. The Expectations Index — based on consumers' short-term outlook for income, business, and labor market conditions — declined to 75.4 from 77.9.

"Consumer confidence declined again in November, most likely prompted by the recent rise in gas prices," Lynn Franco, senior director of economic indicators at The Conference Board, said, referring to pump prices of fuel which rose from October after dropping in four previous months.

The Expectations Index reading of below 80 "suggests the likelihood of a recession remains elevated", Franco added.

The Conference Board is the latest to cite the growing potential of a US economic downturn as the Federal Reserve stays on the path of aggressive rate hikes to tame runaway inflation.

Standard & Poor's, in an outlook published Monday, said the odds of the US economy avoiding recession over next 12 months have dimmed.

US inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, expanded by 7.7% during the year to October, growing at its slowest pace in nine months after peaking with a 9.1% growth during the 12 months to June.

The drop came after relentless interest rate hikes by the Fed, which has added 375 basis points to rates since March. Prior to that, rates peaked at just 25 basis points, as the central bank slashed them to nearly zero after the global COVID-19 outbreak in 2020.

Despite such an aggressive campaign, inflation remains more than three times higher than levels preferred by the central bank, which has vowed to get to its 2% target.

After four straight jumbo-sized hikes of 75 basis points between June and November, markets expect the Fed to impose a smaller increase of 50 basis points at its upcoming rate decision on December 14.

While Fed Chairman Jerome Powell has indicated that the central bank could shift to smaller rate hikes by December, he has also said rates ultimately may need to go higher in 2023 than policy-makers thought would be needed.

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Biden Says Congress Has Busy Agenda Through Christmas, Including Resolving Rail Strike

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Congress has a busy agenda between now and the end of the year as it tries to pass legislation to fund the work of the government and resolve a rail strike looming over the US economy, President Joe Biden said on Tuesday.

"I asked top leaders in Congress whether they'd be willing to come in and talk about what we're going to do between now and Christmas in terms of legislation," Biden said. "There's a lot to do, including resolving the train strike."

Biden met with congressional leaders from both parties, including Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy to discuss the so-called "lame duck" legislative session. Biden said he hopes the parties work together to fund the US government - for which funding is set to expire next month - COVID-19 response efforts and the conflict in Ukraine.

On Monday, Biden called on Congress to immediately adopt a tentative agreement between railroad worker unions and operators to avert a nationwide rail strike that could send ripples through the economy. Biden said the deal would provide a 24% pay raise for rail workers, improved health care benefits and the ability to take unscheduled leave for medical needs. A nationwide rail strike, which may begin as early as December 9, could cost the US economy \$2 billion per day, the Association of American Railroads said.

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US to Provide \$53Mln to Support Ukraine's Electrical Grid Ahead of Winter - State Dept.
(Adds detail and changes attribution in para 1, changes para 2, adds para 3-5)

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) – The United States will provide Ukraine with \$53 million to acquire critical electricity grid equipment as its system comes under pressure due to Russia's special military operation and approaching winter, the State Department said on Tuesday.

"In the midst of Russia's continued brutal attacks against Ukraine's energy infrastructure, Secretary of State Blinken announced today during a meeting of the G7+ on the margins of the NATO Ministerial in Bucharest that the United States government is providing over \$53 million to support acquisition of critical electricity grid equipment," the release stated.

This equipment, which includes distribution transformers, circuit breakers, surge arresters, disconnectors, vehicles and other key equipment will be rapidly delivered in order to help Ukrainians persevere through the winter.

This new funding is in addition to the \$55 million that the US previously provided in emergency energy sector support for generators and other equipment to help restore emergency power and heat to local municipalities impacted by the conflict.

Since Russia's special operation began on February 24, the Biden administration has provided nearly \$32 billion in assistance to Ukraine.

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Iran Threatens Families of World Cup Players – Reports

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Iran has threatened its World Cup soccer team with harm to their families if the players continue to engage in political protest, CNN reported on Tuesday, citing a source involved with World Cup security.

After the players refused to sing Iran's national anthem in their opening match on November 21, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officers allegedly called them to a meeting, threatening their families with "violence and torture" if they continued to refuse to sing the anthem or otherwise engage in political protest, the source said. The coach, Carlos Queiroz, met separately with the officers after the threats.

The source also said that dozens of IRGC officers are in Qatar monitoring the players, who are not allowed to interact with people outside of the team.

In addition, the Iranian government sent over hundreds of people to act as supporters in the stands, the source said, and will increase them to the thousands for the game Tuesday against the US, the source said.

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UN's Special Envoy Fears Escalation in Syria Amid Lack of Efforts to Resolve Conflict

UNITED NATIONS, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is concerned that the situation in Syria will escalate further in the absence of meaningful efforts to resolve the conflict, UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen said on Tuesday.

"I fear a scenario where the situation escalates in part, because there are no serious efforts today to resolve the conflict politically," Pedersen told a UN Security Council meeting.